

# **A billion to save species may be OK, but what about navigation?**

Editorial  
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The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has estimated the cost of saving endangered species on the Missouri River at \$1 billion. That is probably just a down payment. We won't harbor ill feelings about that—provided Congress and the Bush administration wake up to the needs of river transportation and restoration efforts don't threaten the barge and towing industry.

It would take the \$1 billion to buy land from willing sellers, to restore side channels and to make creature-friendly improvements on about 20,000 acres along the lower third of the Missouri River. Environmentalists say that's a minimum effort and want it done by 2020 in order to save the pallid sturgeon, least tern and piping plover from extinction.

Let's face it, it is the law!

Chris Brescia, president of the Midwest Area River Coalition, questions whether spending the \$1 billion as outlined “is the most efficient way to replace habitat.” If proponents of the plan want the support of the river industry, questions about the industry's survivability are going to have to be resolved, he said.

Ron Kucera, an official with the Missouri Department of Natural Resources, has expressed concern that the size of the estimate “is going to scare people away from starting down the road toward doing the things that need to be done.”

So the whole issue becomes one of money and how much is available. There is so much political spin about money that it is disgusting. Yet amid all the moaning and groaning about money shortages, legislators of every ilk weasel out billions for their favorite programs, many of which are nonproductive. The Corps and Coast Guard budgets have been declining for three decades. Under plans by the present administration, the Corps' civil works budget really got smashed!

A viable river transportation system is a critical part of the nation's infrastructure. The lock and dam facilities on some rivers had reached their design limits by the time efforts were introduced to replace Locks and Dam 26 on the Mississippi River near Alton, Ill. A roadblock came in 1974 as the result of environmental and railroad to finance environmental-related activities. We can thank the environmentalists for that.

The fact that waterways move 15 percent of the nation's domestic cargo at a cost of only 2 percent should be evidence enough that a viable water transportation system is a

priority. Now, with fuel prices as high as they are, water transport could be even more beneficial if it weren't for bottlenecks, and it is friendlier environmentally.

Some critics charge that navigation is the sole purpose for damming rivers. Not true. Major floods, in 1927 and 1937 for instance, brought forth a hue and cry for flood control. River transportation existed long before rivers were dammed. Hydroelectric power production became a major benefit. Once the mainstem reservoirs were built on the Missouri, the head of navigation moved to Sioux City, Iowa. It is the needs of a progressive society that have caused river management, not transportation suppliers, who move only to satisfy existing demands.

We cannot begin to estimate how much transportation costs would rise if there were no water transportation in North America. We would all pay it in the marketplace, because all states now benefit.

The environmentalists want the \$1 billion for the Missouri. They also want the \$8 billion for the Everglades. So, too, the \$3 billion for restoring salmon in the Pacific Northwest. So be it. But at the same time let's not let our valuable river infrastructure go begging.

A major flaw in federal stewardship is that if legislators have been decreasing river maintenance and construction to pay for environmental activities. Both are important. We should not put our river system in dire straits.